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New skills in adult education and training: the field of mediation in Portugal and France¹

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Abstract

The concept of competence has been much substantiated, studied and discussed. As the result of new educational models developed in the field of Adult Education and Training (AET) during the last decade, new professionals have emerged, whose intervention is located mainly in the field of Educational Mediation and Adult Education. These professionals have had to develop a set of specific competences for their work. This article will present some results from a predominantly qualitative multi-case study carried out in Portugal and France and discuss data related to those competences and the role of the professionals in these challenging processes.

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1. Introduction

In the field of Adult Education and Training in Portugal and France the concept of competence has gained an increasingly high importance, since it is linked to the emergence of new processes, such as the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) and the Education and Training of Adults (EFA Courses) in Portugal and the Validation of Acquired Experience³ in France. Here the development of skills⁴ and the recognition of knowledge acquired throughout life, which leads to degrees, reached its peak in the last decade in both countries. Also professionals working in this area: the EFA Mediators, the Specialists of Diagnosis and Referral (SDR), the RVC Professionals (PRVC) and the Specialists of VAE need to offer specific skills.

These professionals, whose intervention is located mainly in the fields of Educational Mediation and Adult Education, had to develop a specific set of competences in order to carry out good work in this area. But what are these competences? According to Milburn (2002) they are linked to technical skills but mainly related to

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experiential knowledge and experience acquired in the field and Lascoux (2007) states that a good performance is the result of a serious training in human relationships.

2. Methodology and sample

The research - predominantly qualitative – being reported here focuses particularly on a multi-case study that compares the French and Portuguese realities by referring to their processes of Adult Education and Training, as well as the professional profiles of the mediators associated with them and their professional skills.

The overall goals of the research were:

- To foster the study and research of the field of mediation in the context of adult education; and
- To develop systems of pedagogical innovation in this area.

The cases in this study result from a sample by contrast-deepening (Guerra, 2008, p. 47) i.e.,

this type of sample is located on the border between single case and multiple case studies, because it is intended to establish a comparison between two contrasting cases that work as a case study (in-depth analysis) and as a typology of multiple cases (*Ibidem*).

What was sought, therefore, was an exploration and comparison in depth of each case working towards an exploratory study.

To this end three cases in Portugal (a SDR and three PRVC at a New Opportunities Centre, an EFA Mediator in a Professional School and an EFA Mediator at a Local Development Association) and three cases in France (a VAE Technician at an university, a VAE Coordinator at an Academic Centre for the Validation of Acquired Experience and a VAE Coordinator⁵ at a different Academic Centre of Validation of Acquired Experience) were selected.

This paper will question the concept of competence, as well as present and reflect on the competences that the professional participants in the study had or should have had for the proper performance of their work in Educational Mediation and Adult Education. In addition an attempt will be made to bridge the gap between the theoretical concepts of several authors and the analysis of the semi-directive interviews, observation records and autobiographical narratives made during the exploratory stage of the investigation.

3. The concept of competence

The concept of competence has evolved over time (Le Boterf, 2005) and is increasingly part of current discourses (Tanguy, 1994). Although it appeared over several centuries, the notion of competence started becoming a more significant issue in the 1970s and 1980s by replacing the idea of qualifications (Stroobants, 1993) related to the assessment of professional performance, which required the analysis of individual skills and stated that the task would not only value the assigned work but also the actual work (Le Boterf, 2005).

In the 1980s and 1990s the concept evolved and with it came the concept of continuing education and lifelong learning, so that "being competent in a work situation in 2000 no longer means the same thing as being competent in 1950 or 1970" (Le Boterf, 2005, p. 10).

Fleury and Fleury (2001, p. 1) defined competence as a "word of common sense, to denote a person qualified to do something", which implies knowledge of a subject. However, being competent does not imply only a qualification and a deep understanding of something but it involves a relationship between being and knowing, thus referring to knowledge in action.

As Cruz (2001) pointed out, competence involves an aspect of knowing how to be and a cognitive-behavioral domain (knowledge and know-how). The competence "is consolidated in an action or set of actions organically articulated" (Dias, 2010, p. 74) and it establishes the relationship between knowledge and action (Terssac, 1996, p. 223). For the same author (*Idem*, p. 234) competence refers to all "that is involved in organized action and all that

³ Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE).

⁴ In this paper the concepts of skills and competences are considered in the same sense and other variations of meaning that are to be found in some bibliographic references are not explored.

⁵ The VAE Coordinators are not part of the analysis in this paper, as they performed different functions from the other Professionals, who collaborated in the study.

takes into account the organization of the action" and it is enriched by the knowledge of how to be, as well as social knowledge and the capabilities of communication (Stroobants, 1994).

Thus, only when the knowledge is used, transferred and integrated does it acquire the status of competence, which is always contextualized (Fleury and Fleury, 2001, p. 3). According to these authors (*Ibidem*)

the notion of competence appears (...) associated with verbs such as: to know how to act, to mobilize resources, to integrate multiple and complex knowledge, to know how to learn, to learn how to engage, to take responsibilities, to have strategic vision [competence is, accordingly,] a knowing how to act with responsibility and recognition, which implies to mobilize, integrate, transfer knowledge, (...) and resources that add economic value to the organization and social value to the individual.

Competence and working are interlinked areas and it was, in fact, the changes in the organizational world and in work, which brought new significances to the concept of competence.

Thus, based on Markert (2002, p. 196), it can be said that the changes in the world of work have brought about not only new qualification requirements for workers "but also a new dimension of the content of their capabilities, focused on understanding the whole process production, on the *integral and universal skills*".

In this sense, as the professional future is increasingly uncertain, unstable and demanding, education is founded on an appeal to the inevitable development of transferable skills for new and complex situations i.e. transverse skills.

Thus, according to Dias (2010, p. 74) in educational terms, "the competence emphasizes the power to mobilize resources, expertise or experiential knowledge [and] an approach by skills enhances that students learn by themselves, learning how to learn, building personal knowledge through interaction". The aim, therefore, is that the students mobilize a set of personal, social and scholarly learning that enables them - in action - to solve problems and respond to complex and changing situations that arise in their daily lives, because, as stated Le Boterf (2005, p. 18), "being competent is increasingly being capable of handling complex and unstable situations".

In summary, Machado (1998, p. 93) indicated that "the notion of competence is, in fact, a strong concept and should be recovered but in a perspective that breaks with the criteria that are being driven today: the fatalism of the competitive struggle". Therefore, competence must go beyond the search for competitiveness and seek the integral training of the individual, so that he/she can - in a critical and emancipatory way - transform society (Markert, 2002). This purpose is essential in the field of intervention by the professionals on whom this study focuses - the mediators - and on the objectives that their activity aims to achieve.

4. Some results from the research: competences of mediation in adult education and training

Firstly, it is emphasized that the research concerns the field of Formative Mediation (Gremmo, 2007, Silva 2008, Silva *et al.*, 2010), which is more informal in its scope (Domingos and Freire, 2009) in the area of Adult Education and Training. Thus, the skills that will be referred to, although they are related to a more formal field of Mediation, can fit - to some extent - into the competences that the professionals participating in this study should provide in their work context, since the authors are referring to processes, where they found mediation of knowledge and learning that involves the presence of a third *party*. Thus the authors seek here to bridge the gap between Formal Mediation, which is based mainly on the model of conflict resolution and Formative and Transformative Mediation (Torremorell, 2008) that is found in the Education and Training of Adults.

According to Milburn (2002) Mediation has the function of regulating conflicts, through the enhancement of dialogue and it allows the development of skills that strengthen relationships in order to prevent later conflicts. The communication skills that evoke dialogue and understanding between individuals - in accordance with a non-directive logic - are essential for a proper practice of Mediation.

The Professionals in this study presented these communication skills, when they sought that their Adults reflect on their experiences by questioning them - in a non-directive way - about what they knew and thereby facilitating a process of self-discovery and reflective *praxis*.

I always try to show the positive and negative side of things and if they had had a different intervention with people, they probably would have had another result, despite what they report (Extract of the Interview with Mediator 2)

From this quote above it is possible to determine the concern of the Mediator that the Trainees reflect on their behaviors and attitudes in order to evolve by analyzing other perspectives of the situations that they face, so that they can deal with their problems in other ways.

Therefore, the Mediators should not adopt a passive posture but rather should guide the discussion and create a climate of trust and empathy (Milburn, 2002; Lascoux, 2007; Muller, 2008) by maintaining an attitude of calm, concern and respect for all those involved. Empathy refers to the ability to comprehend and demonstrate this understanding in relation to feelings, emotions, perspectives, problems and interests of the various parties and this happens not only through the analysis of verbal communication but also nonverbal communication. Creating empathy, consequently, involves active listening, the appreciation of feelings, the acceptance of others without judgment and demonstration of interest.

In fact, the Professionals who participated in this research, sought to understand what was the subjective state of their Adults, showed interest in them and tried to anticipate their reactions and answer questions by an analysis of their verbal and nonverbal expressions, thus motivating and giving them positive reinforcement, when they showed behaviors of interest, responsibility and reflection, as can be observed in the following transcripts:

Professional: You just used the simple rule of three; do you see that you know how to use it?

Professional: I see that mathematics will not be a problem for you (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

Reinforce, positively, the experiences of the Adults, using an emphatic, motivating, dynamic speech (e.g.: "So, you said that mathematics was not in your life and you have already given me so many examples ... After all, you know more Maths than you thought ...") (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 3)

...encourages students, questioning, challenging and motivating them for continuing learning and training: "You like to learn, we can see it" (PRVC 3, Observation Record, Session 5)

The prevalence of a motivational behavior characterized by positive reinforcement can be found in these passages, which is an aspect of utmost importance, when one is dealing with adults with few qualifications and often with low self-esteem and self-reliance.

The concern of the Professionals with the performance of their Adults and with their understanding of the concepts that are discussed in the sessions is remarkable:

Question the Adults about the fact that they have any doubts (PRVC 2, Observation Record, Session 1)

The Professional begins by asking if they have any doubts (PRVC 3, Observation Register, Session 5)

Thus, one was not looking at a traditional mode but one where there was a horizontal relationship based on dialogue, where the Professionals sought to understand what the Adults knew about the explanations given and by encouraging their reflection and clarification of doubts.

The Mediator should also be able to congratulate, i.e., to recognize the other for what he does. In fact, "the congratulation or the recognition of the other is an act of knowing how to live, which the mediator in his pedagogical dynamic shall forward to the parties" (Lascoux, 2007, p. 157).

In this sense, the Professionals congratulated the Adults for their options and the willpower to enter into the educational-training process. This was to show satisfaction in relation to the behavior, gestures, communication and attitudes of the parties:

The Professional 2 begins by congratulating the Adults (11) for being present and having come this far (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

The Mediator should be strong, therefore, in terms of interpersonal relationships and should be able to create relationships of trust. In fact, by motivating the Adults, by stimulating them to reflect independently and by establishing a climate of dialogue with them, the Professionals demonstrated skills of interpersonal relationship.

Other skills that the Professionals showed were the ability to create empathy with the Adults, which reflected their concern with creating a harmonious environment:

[The Professional] states that it is a process that involves hard work but they are all fighting for the same purpose, certification and mentions that "your success is my success" (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

The Professional referred to the necessity of the process, which served as a warning to the Adults, but sought that they visualize a desirable end point: the certification. She created empathy, when she said that their success is her success, thus calling for co-responsibility and commitment from all of them, so that the results would be positive.

Which is found in the empathy created with the Adults and in the ease with which she began to conduct the session (SDR, Observation Record, Session 1)

In this passage, it appears that the TDR sought to create the conditions necessary for everyone to feel comfortable and satisfied with her intervention, which was guided by the establishment of trusts. This required techniques such as hermeneutics, interpretation of feelings, situations and words and maieutic, which related to the formulation of propositions that were fair to the person in question (Milburn, 2002, p. 122-123). The need to build trust was also present in the affirmation of PRVC 3, when she stated that:

If people do not feel minimally comfortable with the person, who will be their tutor, their mediator, they will never be able to write whatever it is (Extract from the Interview with PRVC 3)

And the EFA Mediators, accordingly, sought also to establish a close relationship with their Adults, which was essential in their work:

...because we are asked for help for any situation, even in private, personal and we try to help and they can manage to overcome such situations happening (Extract from the Interview with Mediator 1)

When problems arise they come to me, we talk and I try to help them. Sometimes, there are some (...) because, for example, the wife is unemployed and they come asking for help, to see if I can get a job for the wife (laughs) (...) they, I think this is positive, whenever there is something, they seek me. If there wasn't an approximation, say, of empathy, they would avoid coming to talk to me about the issues and they don't, they always look for this approach (Extracts from the Interview with Mediator 2)

However, this same closeness should be viewed with caution or otherwise it may lead to an excess of confidence or, eventually, less impartiality in this important core competence of Mediation work. In fact, impartiality is a key competence in the whole process and refers to the equal treatment of all parties involved.

The Professionals that participated in the study tried to treat all the Adults equally by encouraging their participation in the sessions without, however, requiring them to do so:

The Professional invites the Adults to share some of their life story (PRVC 1, Observation Record, Session 3)

...from there I said, OK; now you choose the activity and you have to work and they worked (Extract from the Interview with Mediator 1)

Milburn (2002, p. 41-42) stated that the Mediator is an interpreter, because "he allows the parties to have a respectful understanding of their motivations and their passions". Thus, he/she facilitates decision-making and the expression of motivations and he/she should be creative and stimulate the Mediation sessions using this creativity by fostering the creation of interactive solutions to solve problem situations that arise on a day-to-day basis.

Lascoux (2007) pointed out that the skills of a Mediator cannot be improvised, but must be worked out, so there is the need to be trained accordingly. This author indicated that the Mediator must have active listening skills and patience, as well as also having a long experience at the level of human relationships.

The study of Milburn (2002) also referred to the fact that there are cases, although they should be avoided, where it is necessary to show some judgment and this happens in Adult Education and Training, for example, to draw attention to the fact that the Adults are not children. As Adults, they have responsibilities and rights, but also duties and, therefore, it becomes necessary to appeal to their conscience and even make them shut up, when necessary. The VAE Specialist denoted the difficulties that some Adults had in committing themselves to rules and deadlines, so it became necessary to call them to reason:

In general, they have great difficulties in respecting and reading the instructions. There are, sometimes, delays into the process.

I am often obliged to remind them that we are in a relationship between Adults and I'm not their Teacher. I also make them understand that they work for themselves and not for me (Extracts from the Interview with Technician of VAE)

During the exploratory phase of the study, it was possible to see situations, where the Mediators had to use their "position of authority" to control their Adults, when they had episodes of conflict and discussion. This is a controversial aspect and even a paradoxical one in terms of the philosophy of Mediation, but it proved to be essential. Otherwise, the Trainees would not have been able to overcome their problems, so the role of the Mediators proved also to be fundamental from this perspective.

However, it was found that Mediator 1 sometimes over reached this authority, when the work was not progressing according to the plan and to her expectations. In fact, she indicated (as noted in the extract below) that she was too demanding and, thus, she often ended up imposing her ideas, because she thought that it was the best for the Trainees. In fact, she put her ideas above what the Trainees could give her, thereby creating a climate of low motivation, where what she wanted and felt right prevailed, even if it was against the will and capabilities of the Adults, which is not what a Mediator should do. Although her ideas were an aspect to consider for the development of the Trainees and their skills, this should include a balanced effort and should not create frustrations in them.

I see that they can't do that, that they have limitations that they can't achieve that goal but I set that goal and it has to be reached and then if I pressure them too much, because they have to achieve and, sometimes, they say: "but we can't do that and she's always insisting and... because we can't... this is so demanding"; maybe that's it, I'm too demanding (Extract from the Interview with Mediator 1)

Is one faced with a specificity of Mediation, when one refers to the field of the Education and Training of Adults, since the Trainees often fail to develop sufficient autonomy to carry out the tasks without some imposition? Or, on the other hand, does this behavior go against the basic principles of Mediation and the basic skills of a Mediator, even if it is in a particular context?

Another competence of the Mediator is the ability to put him- or herself in the shoes of someone else. Indeed the Mediator should get each party to analyze the situation from the perspective of the other and this action was undertaken by the Professionals:

That is, I sometimes try to put myself on the side of the Adult by trying to see to what extent he is having difficulties, to what extent he is, ah... try to understand why he did not deliver, for example or why he did not develop, why, why he does not appear...

... to try to understand, sometimes, I put myself in the Adult's shoes and, sometimes, also, with some, with some information they are passing on, I also try ah... to see the problems that occur along the process (Extracts from the Interview with PRVC 3)

The PRVC 3 showed concern about the behavior of the Adults and sought to put herself in their place by analyzing - from her perspective - the situation and reflecting on the reasons for its occurrence, without making judgments. However, the Professionals did not always reveal good communication management:

Aggressive tone of voice with some Adults, when they showed difficulties in answering the questions as she wanted (PRVC 2, Observation Record, Session 2)

Raise the voice, when an Adult confronts her with questions about issues that she has already explained (PRVC 2, Observation Record, Session 3)

The Professional makes expressions of boredom: staring at the floor, looking out of the window or arranging her clothes, while one or another Adult asks her questions (PRVC 3, Observation Record, Session 5)

She appeared to be impatient, when the Trainees did not respond immediately, pulling on her bracelet, hair, staring at the floor or the windows (Mediator 1, Observation Record, Session 1)

... facial expression of boredom, looking at them very seriously (Mediator 1, Observation Record, Session 3)

Despite these observations during the exploratory phase of the study, it was determined that these conditions were not the rule, so that its occurrence would have been due to conditions of emotional stress, fatigue, excessive work load and/or responsibilities. This fact does not justify the position taken by the Professionals, because control is another emotional skill of a Mediator.

In summary, neutrality, impartiality, communication management, relational balance, empathy, creation of bonds of trust and of a harmonious atmosphere are emphasized as essential competences for the Mediation work. However, it was also noticed that not all of the Professionals dealt with situations the same way, which reflected the existence of quite diversified professional profiles in the field of Mediation, which was also related with personal characteristics. This aspect increases the complexity of the Mediation field, especially, in contexts involving the Education and Training of Adults.

5. Conclusion

Lopes, Cunha and Serrano (2010, p. 920-921) indicated that the competences that contribute to the success of Mediation are "impartiality, credibility, training, kindness, firmness, conciliatory attitude, understanding, expression of satisfaction, control of hostile statements between the parties, creating a climate of confidence, ability to suggest (...) the clarification of important issues".

The Mediator should, in terms of transformative practice, create an enabling environment for the parties to clarify their feelings, their goals, their expectations, so that the participants make decisions for themselves. In fact, the figures of Mediation in the field of Education and Training of Adults, as has been seen, facilitate communication, guide the Adults, since they provide the basis for their reflection about their skills, but it must be the Adults themselves that complete this task from the information provided to them.

Self-reflection, self-consciousness and the denial of value judgments are essential for the practice of transformative Mediation. The Mediator must have an optimistic position concerning the skills and motivations of the parties and of their ability to transform themselves and grow as relational beings. He/she should allow for and be sensitive to the expression of feelings by the participants, as the oppression of emotions or the devaluing of them goes against the principles of transformative action, since it denies their recovery of power. Thus,

in this context, the work of the mediator is to create the conditions for managing the conversation and help the participants to chart their itinerary, their own solution to the conflict. This is an invitation to dialogue, understanding and active listening, to the reflections and discussions with our own experience and that of others. The paths are, in themselves, a reflection of what they consider that can intertwine, of the bridges that may have, of what is similar and what is different, what is beyond acceptable or possible (Basto, 2008, p. 17).

To sum up it can be stated that

the general framework and the control of the relationship and of the exchanges between the parties form the essential element of competence in mediation. They represent the single point of support of mediators, which do not have any prerogative, any power connected to their status (Milburn, 2002, p. 24).

In conclusion, the study results point to communication and interpersonal relationships, the creation of empathy, the building up of confidence, the ability to put themselves in the shoes of the Adults and their motivational behavior, as the core competences exhibited by the Professionals that participated in this study. However, it is emphasized that in certain circumstances it was verified that some of them and some Adults had a closer relationship than expected, which may call into question the impartiality necessary for a proper job performance. Although we have no data to demonstrate that the pedagogical results were, in any way, influenced by this closeness, it is an essential aspect and one on which it is pertinent to reflect.

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